

The Scottish credit and qualifications framework: lessons for the EQF

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SUMMARY

The SCQF is one of the longest-established comprehensive qualifications frameworks and is often perceived as one of the most successful. This article describes the main features of the SCQF and outlines its progress, drawing on recent studies and evaluations by the authors. It draws lessons for the EQF and for further development of national frameworks to respond to it. These lessons concern the specific requirements of meta-frameworks and comprehensive frameworks, the need for realistic expectations and time scales, and the value of an incremental and pragmatic strategy for introducing a learning-outcomes approach. The article also identifies issues relating to the architecture of a levels framework and the limitations, as well as strengths, of a voluntary partnership-based approach.

Key words

Educational reform, comparability of qualifications, level of qualifications, learning outcomes, partnership, United Kingdom

The SCQF

The Scottish credit and qualifications framework (SCQF) was one of the first comprehensive national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), and it is widely perceived as one of the most successful (Young, 2005). In this article we review the SCQF and its progress to date, and we discuss possible lessons for the European qualifications framework and for countries seeking to establish their own qualifications framework in line with it.

In many respects the conditions in Scotland have been favourable for an NQF. It is a small country with a relatively homogenous and cohesive education system and a tradition of partnership and consensual policy-making. A single body, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), awards nearly all school qualifications with most delivered in colleges which, with higher education institutions (HEIs) such as universities, are the main providers of formal learning beyond school. Perhaps most importantly, the process started early. The SCQF builds on a series of reforms to create a more coherent and unified qualifications system. In 1984, a national system of outcomes-based modules replaced much of the vocational education offered in colleges and schools. In 1999, this modular system was merged with academic school qualifications to create a unified system of national qualifications (NQs), which covered most institution-based academic and vocational qualifications below higher education. A framework for higher education, the Scottish credit accumulation and transfer (Scotcat) system, began to be developed in the early 1990s. It rationalised university degree awards and enabled them to be linked with subdegree qualifications (higher national certificates and diplomas) awarded by the SQA. A third framework, Scottish vocational qualifications (SVQs), was introduced in the early 1990s. SVQs are competence-based occupational qualifications, often delivered in the workplace, designed on principles similar to national vocational qualifications (NVQs) used elsewhere in the UK.

The SCQF was formally launched in 2001. It was initially based on the first two subframeworks (NQs and Scotcat) and it aimed to include the third subframework (SVQs) as well as all other qualifications awarded in Scotland. Its formal architecture is much looser – less stringent – than the three subframeworks. The curriculum structure and methods of assessment for NQs and SVQs are quite tightly prescribed, whereas to fit in the SCQF a qualification has only to meet three criteria: it must be credit-rated (with each credit point equivalent to 10 hours' notional learning time); it must be assigned to one of the 12 levels of the framework; and the assessment must be quality-assured. The 12 SCQF levels cover a wide range of learning, from provi-

sion for learners with severe learning difficulties to study at doctorate level. The published level descriptors show characteristic outcomes for each level under five headings: knowledge and understanding; practice (applied knowledge and understanding); generic cognitive skills; communication, ICT and numeracy skills; and autonomy, accountability and working with others (SCQF, 2003). The SCQF may incorporate whole qualifications or components or units of qualifications. However, credit can only be allocated to learning at a single level, so a qualification which covers learning at more than one level must have identifiable single-level components if it is to be included in the framework.

The SCQF's relatively loose architecture reflects its character as a descriptive or communications framework, rather than a regulatory framework. It has been described as a 'national language' for describing learning in Scotland. Its formal aims are to:

- assist people of all ages and circumstances to access appropriate education and training over their lifetime to fulfil their personal, social and economic potential;
- enable employers, learners and the general public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to one another and how different types of qualifications can contribute to improving the skills of the workforce.

It developed through a partnership of the main bodies which awarded qualifications - the SQA and HEIs - with the Scottish executive (¹) (Raffe, 2003). The SQA, the executive and two bodies representing higher education became the four 'development partners' which oversaw the design and implementation of the framework. They were supported by an influential joint advisory committee which represented the main stakeholders. However, as the framework developed, this partnership model proved inadequate. In 2006, the representative organisation for Scottish colleges became a fifth development partner, and it was decided to replace the partnership model with a company limited by guarantee, which would be controlled by the development partners but have more powers to take decisions and act in its own right. This, it is hoped, will maintain the momentum of framework development.

(¹) The devolved Scottish government.

Progress

A recent evaluation of the SCQF recorded slow but steady progress (Gallicher et al., 2005). Nearly all the main qualifications awarded by HEIs and the SQA are now in the framework. HEIs and colleges increasingly refer to the SCQF in their prospectuses and websites, and the Scottish qualifications certificate, which records all SQA awards, refers to SCQF levels and credits. These are important achievements, but they may represent the easier part of implementation as they lie within the sphere of the SCQF's 'owners', the development partners. The challenge is to extend the framework to incorporate other qualifications and other types of learning. Work has been completed with the Police College and with professional bodies such as the Institute of Bankers and the Scottish Childminders Association. Other work is ongoing in social services, in the National Health Service and in community learning and development. It is taking much longer to include work-based and occupational qualifications such as SVQs, partly because it can be harder to credit-rate and assign levels to these qualifications based on current descriptors, and partly because progress depends on parallel qualifications (such as NVQs) being placed in other UK frameworks. Awareness and engagement among the wider lifelong learning community, and among key stakeholders such as employers, have so far been patchy.

Colleges are being given the authority to credit-rate qualifications – an important gate-keeping function for the SCQF – and a pilot project is under way. Professional and statutory bodies which award qualifications have not been given this authority. Guidelines have been established for recognition of prior learning, and some projects are exploring how to use them.

The SCQF is a credit framework as well as a qualifications framework and one of its main objectives is to promote mobility and credit transfer within and between sectors of learning, and especially between colleges and HEIs. Institutions have used the framework to coordinate and link their provision and to design progression pathways. The SCQF's language of credits and levels is being used to map progression opportunities for the benefit of learners. Nevertheless, although the framework assigns credit values to learning, it does not guarantee that the credit will be recognised by another institution. Some HEIs have been more ready than others to recognise college qualifications, and accept that the 'general' credit recognised by the SCQF can count as 'specific' credit towards their own awards. Our evaluation found examples of effective linking and credit transfer but suggested that most might have taken place without the SCQF, although the

framework undoubtedly provided a useful tool and language to underpin them (Gallacher et al., 2005).

Other UK and Irish frameworks

Other parts of the UK have qualifications frameworks. These frameworks share common features, include a learning outcomes philosophy and a shared definition and measure of credit. Of other UK frameworks, the credit and qualifications framework for Wales (CQFW) is closest to the SCQF; both are comprehensive frameworks with similar objectives, although the CQFW has only nine levels compared with the SCQF's 12 (National Council – ELWa, 2003). The CQFW is being developed in parallel with two partial frameworks which will cover England, Wales and Northern Ireland (that is, all the UK except Scotland). These are the framework for higher education qualifications and the revised national qualifications framework, a regulatory framework which will cover qualifications below higher education. An important aim of these frameworks is to simplify credit transfer between different awarding bodies, especially for vocational qualifications. In this respect they differ from the SCQF, whose main focus has been to improve coherence and links across the different subframeworks and sectors of learning, rather than across different awarding bodies. Where the SCQF has been used to promote credit transfer, this has typically been between sectors such as colleges and HEIs.

The UK frameworks are cooperating on areas of common interest such as the credit-rating of occupational NVQs and SVQs. The need to link the different frameworks is well recognised, especially as many companies and many labour-market institutions cross the UK's internal boundaries. The UK frameworks have collaborated with the national framework of qualifications for Ireland to produce a leaflet, *Qualifications can cross boundaries*, which allows users to read across the 10 levels of the Irish framework, the 12 levels of the SCQF and the nine levels of the frameworks in the rest of the UK.

Lessons for the EQF

In September 2005, the UK Presidency of the EU hosted a conference in Glasgow on 'Qualifications frameworks in Europe: learning across boundaries', to support consultation on the EQF (Raffe, 2005). This showcased the SCQF as a source of lessons for the EQF, and for countries establishing NQFs in line with it. Below, we discuss some of the lessons.

Meta-frameworks and comprehensive frameworks

The SCQF, like the EQF, is a meta-framework in the sense that it sits above other frameworks. It is not precisely comparable with the EQF: its main function is to link different branches or institutional sectors of learning in the same country, whereas a main purpose of the EQF is to link equivalent branches or sectors of learning in different countries. Nevertheless, the SCQF illustrates several features of a meta-framework. It reminds us that a meta-framework should be 'looser' than the frameworks which sit beneath it, and that a comprehensive framework must be compatible with the diverse contents and methods of learning which it embraces (it may achieve this by being 'loose'). One reason for the perceived success of the SCQF is that it has maintained the support of all institutional sectors of learning, including higher education. This contrasts with the experience of other countries, including New Zealand and South Africa, where comprehensive frameworks have run into difficulties when they have lost the support of higher education or other key sectors.

Speakers at the Glasgow conference noted that current attempts to promote transparency among the UK and Irish frameworks provided a microcosm of the challenge faced by the whole of Europe. For example, the Scottish experience shows that progress may be affected if qualifications need to be placed in several frameworks developing at different speeds. The placing of SVQs in the Scottish framework has been delayed by the need to make this compatible with the placing of related NVQs in other UK frameworks. The sequence in which the EQF, sectoral frameworks (covering occupational fields or economic sectors) and national frameworks are developed and commonly aligned will require careful consideration. For example, should mechanisms for relating sectoral frameworks to the EQF be established before the same frameworks are related to national frameworks?

Realistic expectations

Another lesson is the need for realistic expectations of the impact of a framework and the speed with which it can be made effective. It takes time to develop and implement an NQF. The SCQF has emerged from a series of policy initiatives which can be traced as far back as 1984, when the national system of modular vocational education was introduced. If Scotland has still not completed its NQF after 22 years, instant results should not be expected in other countries where circumstances may be less favourable. Awareness and understanding of the SCQF have spread slowly, and tend to be confined to those who use the framework and need to know about it.

It is also important to have realistic expectations about the capacity of an NQF to achieve change. Our evaluation of the SCQF concluded that it could be a useful tool: an instrument of change rather than an agent of change (Gallacher et al., 2005). For example, it can supply the tools for credit transfer but it cannot itself ensure that credit is recognised and transferred. To achieve impact a qualification framework needs 'policy breadth' (Raffe, 2003); it must be complemented by other policies which motivate people to use the potential which the framework provides. In this respect, wider lifelong learning policies and strategies are key, for example policies which promote recognition of non-formal learning and links between different institutional sectors and branches of learning.

Incremental strategy

The SCQF and the frameworks it embraces illustrate a pragmatic, incremental approach to developing an outcomes-based qualifications system. Rather than replace an input-based system with an outcomes-based system in one move, they have developed incrementally, starting from a conventional (input-based) understanding of levels and volumes of learning, and progressively reviewing and modifying these in terms of an outcomes-based philosophy. For example, the SCQF had little impact on many colleges and universities in the short term, but whenever the occasion has arisen to restructure provision in or across institutions it has provided a language and a toolkit for doing so. In this way the education and training system has moved step by step towards one defined by the SCQF's notions of outcomes, credit and levels. An outcomes-based language has gradually become more widely accepted and re-alised in practice.

Defining levels

The SCQF offers lessons for building frameworks elsewhere, especially for the concept of level. The principles for defining levels of adult learning, in which the lower levels typically apply to adults with low initial qualifications and those returning to learning, may differ from the principles for defining levels in childhood education, which tend to reflect the logic of child development. Scotland is currently reforming the school curriculum, from age 3 to 18, around a framework of six levels, but only the highest two of the six levels are aligned with the SCQF. Qualifications frameworks need to develop consistent understandings on whether they relate specifically to formal qualifications, which are rarely achieved before age 15 or 16, or whether they attempt to describe all learning, including learning by young children.

A further issue is the difference between the level of a qualification and the learning that leads to the qualification, which may be at more than one level. For SQA awards the usual rule is that at least half of the credit value of a qualification must be at the level of the qualification. However, for larger qualifications this proportion may be smaller. For example, a Scottish bachelor's degree with honours potentially covers learning at four SCQF levels; as a qualification it sits at level 10 but only 90 of the minimum 480 credit points must be at level 10. In providing a common translation device between different European frameworks, the EQF will need to allow for the differences between (credit) frameworks which recognise that each qualification may include components at different levels, and other frameworks which assign levels only to whole qualifications.

Voluntarism and partnership

The relative success of the Scottish framework is often attributed to it being a descriptive (rather than regulatory) framework which has developed through voluntary partnership. However, the partnership model raises issues which are likely to face the EQF. First, it faces challenges on effective coordination and maintaining the pace of development, because each step requires the agreement of all partners. Just as the SCQF has had to develop a central executive capacity, so is it important that the 'EU-level coordination structure' proposed for the EQF has sufficient autonomy and a mandate to maintain the momentum of development. Second, the distinction between a descriptive or communications framework and a regulatory framework may be

come blurred over time. A successful communications framework will, by definition, become part of the language used to describe learning; it will also become part of the language used to regulate, fund and coordinate learning, even if the framework is not itself part of the formal process of regulation or funding. Thus, countries' participation in the EQF may be voluntary, but countries which do not take part may find it harder to benefit from European funding, conceptual support, common learning and coordination, to the extent that these rely on the language of the EQF.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Scottish experience suggests that European and national qualification frameworks should:

- have clear and realistic objectives;
- be as 'loose' in their design as is consistent with their objectives;
- be developed step-by-step over a period of time, especially if an outcomes approach has yet to be widely accepted and embedded in practice;
- recognise the different design implications of credit frameworks and other qualifications frameworks;
- balance the benefits of partnership and voluntarism with the need for central coordination.

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Annex: Some basic data about Scotland

Scotland has a population of five million. It was one of the industrial power-houses of Europe from the time of the Industrial Revolution onwards, being a world leader in manufacturing and shipbuilding-related industries. Like other advanced industrialised economies, it has seen a decline in the importance of manufacturing and primary-based extractive industries. This has, however, been combined with a rise in the service sector of the economy which is now the largest sector in Scotland, with significant rates of growth over the past decade. The Scottish economy is closely linked with the rest of Europe, and Scotland has the third largest GDP per capita of any UK region after London and the south east of England.

School is compulsory to age 16 and two thirds of pupils continue at school for one or two post-compulsory years. Post-school learning is offered by a range of providers, including 20 HEIs (mostly universities) and 43 publicly-funded colleges, as well as private training providers, voluntary organisations, professional bodies and companies. In the 10 years between 1994/95 and 2004/05, the number of higher education (HE) students increased by 36 % from 203 000 to 277 000 (²). The highest increases occurred at postgraduate level (73 %) and sub-degree level (40 %). Subdegree HE is mainly provided by colleges which represent 20 % of total higher education provision in Scotland. The age participation index (API) – a measure of the proportion of young people who enter a full-time HE course before the age of 21 – reached 51.5 % between 2000 and 2002 but has since fallen to 46.4 % (in 2004/05). Scotland's colleges provide a wide range of full-time and part-time courses, at all levels, for learners across the age range. The number of college enrolments below HE level more than doubled after 1994/95 to reach a peak of 450 790 in 2001/02, since when it has declined by 12 %. Most enrolments (86 %) are in vocational courses.

(²) Scottish Executive (2006b) High level summary of statistics trends for lifelong learning
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/933/0046967.pdf>